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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000777

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: HUMMERS, NUMBERS, AND OLIGARCHS: WHO'S WHO ON ARMENIA'S STREETS

1. (U) THIS CABLE IS SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED. PLEASE PROTECT ACCORDINGLY.

SUMMARY

12. (SBU) SOMETIMES FOR PURE VANITY, SOMETIMES AS A CHARM AGAINST TRAFFIC POLICE, ARMENIA'S RESIDENTS ARE PICKING THEIR OWN LICENSE PLATE NUMBERS AND PAYING HANDSOMELY FOR THEM. FLASHY NUMBER PLATES HAVE BECOME DE RIGUEUR FOR YEREVAN'S FLASHY CARS, AND IDENTIFY RELATIVES AND CLOSE ASSOCIATES OF ARMENIA'S TYCOONS. AS EVEN THE MIDDLE CLASSES CANNOT RESIST THE TEMPTATION TO PICK THEIR OWN LUCKY NUMBERS, CUSTOM LICENSE PLATES HAVE BECOME A STEADY SOURCE OF INFORMAL INCOME FOR ARMENIA'S TRAFFIC POLICE AND ANOTHER SIGN OF ARMENIAN SOCIETY'S WILLINGNESS TO SUPPORT PETTY CORRUPTION. END SUMMARY.

ROYAL FLUSH: THE HIERARCHY OF NUMBERS

13. (SBU) PERHAPS THE PRESIDENT STARTED IT ALL WITH 001 UU 01, BUT THE DESIRABILITY FOR LICENSE PLATE NUMBERS BEARING DOUBLE ZEROS AND REPEATING NUMBERS HAS CAUGHT ON. LONG A STANDARD PRACTICE IN ARMENIA FOR OFFICIAL CARS--THE DEFENSE MINISTER'S MERCEDES BEARS 002 UU 02, THE SPEAKER OF PARLIAMENT'S, 001 OO 01, AND THE PRIME MINISTER'S 001 LL 01--ARMENIA'S OLIGARCHS HAVE ADOPTED THE SAME PATTERNS FOR THEIR PRIVATE CARS. THANKS TO THE ENTERPRISING SPIRIT OF THE HEADS OF MUNICIPAL TRAFFIC POLICE, WELL-OFF ARMENIANS HAVE ESTABLISHED FAMILY NUMBERS--PATTERNS AND NUMBERS THAT IDENTIFY THEM AND THEIR CLOSE ASSOCIATES. IN MANY CASES OLIGARCHS HAVE PURCHASED EXCLUSIVE USE OF ALL THE DOUBLE-ZERO PLATES AVAILABLE WITH THEIR CHOSEN NUMBER (THAT IS, WITH ALL THE POSSIBLE COMBINATIONS FOR THE TWO LETTERS IN THE MIDDLE) FOR THE CARS OF THEIR FAMILY, STAFF AND FRIENDS.

FOUR HUMMERS: A THEME AND VARIATION

14. (SBU) THE FLAGSHIPS OF YEREVAN'S HIERARCHY OF NUMBERS ARE YEREVAN'S LARGEST AND MOST CONSPICUOUS AUTOMOBILES: THE FOUR HUMMER HUMVEES. GAGIK TSAROUKIAN (DODI GAGO), OWNER OF MULTI GROUP AND YEREVAN'S FIRST HUMMER (AND NOW ALSO, YEREVAN'S FIRST ROLLS ROYCE) HAS DE FACTO EXCLUSIVE RIGHTS TO THE VARIOUS POSSIBILITIES USING 08 XX 008 (XX REPRESENTING THE VARIOUS POSSIBLE LETTER COMBINATIONS) FOR HIS, HIS FAMILY'S, HIS STAFF'S AND HIS SECURITY GUARD'S CARS. SIMILARLY, SAMVEL ALEKSIAN (LFIK SAMO), A PROUD OWNER OF YEREVAN'S SECOND HUMMER AND ARMENIA'S SUGAR MONOPOLY, HAS RESERVED 06 XX 006 AND VARIATIONS THEREOF FOR HIS FRIENDS AND FAMILY. RUBEN HAYRAPETIAN, A.K.A. NEMETS (GERMAN) RUBO OWNS YEREVAN'S THIRD HUMMER, THE GRAND TOBACCO COMPANY AND THE PLATES 05 XX 005. A FOURTH HUMMER, OWNED BY PRESIDENT KOCHARIAN'S SON, BEARS THE PLATE 07 UU 007, THOUGH IN A NOD TO DEMOCRACY (OR PERHAPS, JAMES BOND) VARIATIONS OF THE 007 PATTERN ARE STILL AVAILABLE TO THE WELL-CONNECTED FOR USD 2,000 - 3,000, PAYABLE TO THE HEAD OF THE TRAFFIC POLICE.

UPWARD MOBILITY

15. (SBU) CUSTOM LICENSE PLATES AREN'T RESERVED FOR YEREVAN'S RICH. REGIONAL BOSSES HAVE THEIR OWN THEMES: 03 XX 001 MEANS LITTLE IN YEREVAN BUT TELLS RESIDENTS OF GYUMRI THAT THE OWNER IS FRIENDS OR FAMILY WITH GYUMRI'S MINISTER OF PARLIAMENT. MIDDLE CLASS CITIZENS ARE PAYING MORE MODEST SUMS FOR LESS PRESTIGIOUS PLATES--THAT IS, THOSE WITH MISMATCHED NUMBERS OR WITHOUT THE TWO ZEROS. A LADA NIVA FOR SALE AT A YEREVAN CAR MARKET WITH LICENSE PLATE 08 LT 009 COSTS USD 3,000 WITHOUT PLATES, USD 4,500 WITH. THE STRAIGHT 12 LL 345, OR THE FULL HOUSE, 44 LL 333, CAN GO FOR AS LITTLE AS USD 150.

SAFETY IN NUMBERS

16. (SBU) BESIDES THE BENEFITS OF VANITY AND PRESTIGE, LUCKY
NUMBER PLATES BRING IMMUNITY FROM HARASSMENT BY THE TRAFFIC
POLICE. BECAUSE SPECIAL PLATES SIGNIFY A SPECIAL
RELATIONSHIP--FIDUCIARY OR OTHERWISE--WITH THE HEAD OF
TRAFFIC POLICE, THE STREET POLICE ARE UNDERSTANDABLY
RELUCTANT TO STOP CARS BEARING CUSTOM NUMBERS. WHILE A
BRAZEN TRAFFIC COP MIGHT NEVERTHELESS STOP A CAR BEARING THE
SIMPLE 12 XX 123 (WHICH SIGNALS, AFTER ALL, LITTLE
CONNECTION AND A WILLINGNESS TO PAY PETTY BRIBES), A PLATE
BEARING, FOR EXAMPLE, 05 XX 555 (BELONGING TO MANVEL
GRIGORIAN, THE DEPUTY MINISTER OF DEFENSE, FORMER TRUCK
DRIVER AND KARABAKH WAR HERO, ONCE ACCUSED OF ACCEPTING
KICKBACKS FROM PUBLIC UTILITIES IN ECHMIADZIN) IS "AS GOOD
AS RED [DIPLOMATIC] PLATES" SAYS AN EMBASSY DRIVER AND
FORMER TRAFFIC POLICE OFFICER.

COMMENT: A LITTLE MORE EQUAL?

17. (SBU) EVEN THOSE ARMENIANS WHO ARE UNWILLING TO PAY FOR
CUSTOM LICENSE NUMBERS ARE SURPRISINGLY WILLING TO ACCEPT
THE PRACTICE AS LEGITIMATE. IT IS NOT PERCEIVED AS REAL
CORRUPTION, NOTED THE EMBASSY FRAUD INVESTIGATOR, BECAUSE
ANYONE CAN RECEIVE A NORMAL (RANDOM) LICENSE PLATE WITHOUT
PAYING A FACILITATION FEE AND, OF COURSE, ALL PRIVATE
NUMBERS TECHNICALLY HAVE THE SAME LEGAL STATUS. PERHAPS
ARMENIANS ARE SO KEEN TO ACCEPT (AND SUPPORT) THE SYSTEM
BECAUSE IT SIMPLY ADDS CLARITY TO FAMILIAR SYSTEMS OF
NEPOTISM AND FAVORITISM. AT LEAST YOU ALWAYS KNOW WHO'S
CUTTING IN FRONT OF YOU...
WALKER